



COUNTIES IN GEORGIA---HOW DO WE COMPARE???

*By Ron C. Cross,
Board of Commission Chairman*

Georgia has quite a few counties - 159 to be exact - with some folks around Fulton County trying to reestablish Milton County. Because of the immense diversity in size, location, demographics, etc., it is difficult to compare Columbia County with every single county. However, we do periodically compare our great county

with our adjacent counties and what we call our "benchmark counties." These are the counties around the state that mirror Columbia County in population, demographics, growth, etc. The chart below shows how we fare in some important areas with our three adjacent counties and with seven "benchmark" counties. I think you will be pleased and proud of our position.

Column A lists both neighboring counties which vary widely in population from 8,074 to 199,486 and our benchmark counties which are similar to Columbia County in population, per capita income,

demographics, and growth.

Column B lists the 2008 population for each county. The average population for all eleven counties is 116,657 which may be close to Columbia County's 2010 population when the 2010 Census has been completed.

Column C lists the number of county employees in 2010. It should be the goal of every county to have enough employees to serve the needs and programs of that county but not to have too many to be efficient and cost-effective. We have 866 employees and the average for all listed counties is 1162. Therefore, we have 296 fewer employees or approximately 25% less than the eleven-county average.

Column D lists the citizens served by each county employee. This is determined by dividing the population by the number of county employees. Our county has an average of 1 employee for service to 128 citizens. This ratio illustrates the quality and efficiency of our employees in providing a wide variety of excellent services in a cost-effective manner. Please note that only one county has a better ratio and that Augusta-Richmond County employees serve only half

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INFORMATION FROM BENCHMARK AND NEIGHBORING COUNTIES

A County	B 2008 Population	C # of County Employees 2010	D Citizens Served per County Employee	E Bond Rating	F 2009 County M&O and Bond Millage Rate*	G 2009 School M&O and Bond Millage Rate*	H Year of Last Millage Rate Increase for County M&O and Bonds	I Percentage of Unemployment Dec 2009**
Columbia	110,627	866	128 citizens	County: AA+ Water: AA	7.922	17.090	1998	6.6%
Lincoln	8,074	130	62 citizens	School: A	9.700	15.747	2008	11.4%
McDuffie	21,756	200	109 citizens	County: A+	7.800	17.190	1999	11.7%
Richmond	199,486	3250	61 citizens	County: A+	8.149	19.342	2007	9.6%
Average for Neighboring Counties	76,439	1583	77 citizens		8.5496	17.4263		10.9%
Bartow	94,913	800	119 citizens	County: A+	7.800	17.900	2005 (decreasing since 2006)	12.6%
Clarke	114,737	1700	68 citizens	Water: AA	13.200	20.000	2009	7.0%
Coweta	122,924	756	163 citizens	County: AA-	6.930	18.590	2007	10.8%
Douglas	127,932	1020	125 citizens	Water: AA	7.932	21.350	2009	11.0%
Fayette	106,465	756	140 citizens	County: AA-	7.391	23.420	2006	8.3%
Hall	184,814	1600	116 citizens	County: A+	6.250	16.420	2001 (decreasing since 2002)	9.0%
Henry	191,502	1700	113 citizens	County: AA	10.969	23.060	1993	10.3%
Average for Benchmark Counties	134,755	1190	121 citizens		8.6388	20.1057		9.9%
Average for Columbia, Neighboring, and Benchmark Counties	116,657	1162	109 citizens		8.5493	19.1008		9.8%

*Millage rates do not include State and other rates that may include Fire, EMS, Ind Dev Auth, Capital Outlay, etc.

**Information from the GA Dept. of Revenue.

**GA Dept. of Labor

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as many citizens as does Columbia County employees. This is a very important indicator of highly efficient government.

Columbia County has the highest bond rating (AA+) of all the counties in Column E. We are one of only five counties in Georgia with a AA+ rating or better. This excellent rating saved the citizens almost a million dollars in interest fees for the bonded projects approved in the last SPLOST (1¢ or Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax) referendum.

Column F shows that Columbia County's millage rate of 7.922 is the lowest in our neighboring counties whose average is 8.5496 and below the average of 8.6388 for our benchmark counties. You can also see in Column H that Columbia County has not increased the millage rate since 1998. Of course, our taxes can increase if our property values increase as determined by the state evaluation criteria. Property tax evaluations are now frozen for this year and next.

Column G shows the portion of total tax millage from the school boards. In Columbia County, it accounts for almost two-thirds of our tax bills. Education is a very important part of the success of Columbia County and the success of the nation and, hopefully, our citizens will continue to support the school system E-SPLOST renewal next election.

Columbia County is in the enviable position of being at the top or near the top in service comparisons for neighboring and benchmark counties. We have added many new facilities under the voter-approved SPLOST programs and have not added undue expense to the taxpayers. We continue to be progressive with the establishment of our 311 telephone service system. We are only one of seven Georgia cities and counties that have one number for county information and service. This allows us to eliminate several positions in various departments since all calls for these departments are routed from the 311 system. It is an honor to serve Columbia County, and we hope you are happy with our level of service.

WATER UTILITY DIVISION

Have you ever wondered how the water you drink gets to your faucet? Or where the water goes that drains from your sink? Employees at the Columbia County Water Utility spend countless hours working diligently to deliver safe drinking water to our community and to clean the "used" water before returning it to the environment.

The Water Cycle

Nature has its own system for purifying water called the hydrologic cycle: evaporation, condensation, precipitation, and percolation. Columbia County also has a water cycle: withdraw, treat, distribute, collect, clean, and return.

Under the direction of Treatment Operations Manager, John Maldonado, the water is made safe to drink at two water treatment facilities by removal of disease causing



Flocculation chamber at the water plant, where coagulants are slowly mixed with incoming water

organisms, chemical contaminants, and solid pollutants. Columbia County withdraws water from the Savannah River and Clarks Hill Lake. Chemicals are added that cause solids and silt in the water to stick together. After the chemical addition, the water is allowed to settle, and the heavier solids sink to the bottom. The clear water from the top of the sedimentation basin is filtered to remove any traces of remaining material. After filtration, chlorine is added to kill the disease-causing organisms, and fluoride is added to prevent tooth decay.



John Maldonado,
Treatment Operations Manager

From the water treatment plants, the water enters the distribution system - domain of Systems Operation Manager Mark Inglett. The distribution system is a series of water mains, pumping stations, and storage tanks used to deliver water to homes and businesses. One of the most visible components of the water system is the elevated storage tank. There are 10

of these in the County ranging in capacity from 250,000 to 1 million gallons. There are also 5 ground level storage tanks, four of which hold 5 million gallons each. These storage tanks allow the Water Utility to have plenty of water available during periods of high demand.



After water is used by the citizens of the County, it is returned to the Water Utility via a series of sewer lines and pumping stations known as the conveyance system. This system, also overseen by Inglett, carries water back to Maldonado's jurisdiction - one of the Utility's four wastewater treatment plants. At these plants a variety of contaminants are removed including large items (e.g., sticks and rags), inorganic materials (e.g., sand, clay,



Mark Inglett, System Operations Manager

and eggshells), organic chemicals (e.g., pesticides and herbicides), and bacteria. Once the contaminants are reduced to natural levels, the water is returned to a creek or the river. The biosolids that are removed during the treatment process are dewatered and utilized as fertilizer on hay fields.

Growing to Meet Your Needs

The Water Utility works diligently to stay ahead of the population growth and development in the County. In 2006, the Jim Blanchard Water Treatment Plant underwent construction to increase its

capacity from 31 to 46 million gallons per day (MGD). Water lines have recently been installed on several roads throughout the County including Ridge Road, Freeman Harris Road, Swint Road, and Mistletoe Road. We are also in the process of adding additional sewer line capacity to transport sewage to the Little River Water Pollution Control Plant which is located off Hardy McManus Road. Little River was expanded from 3 MGD to 6 MGD in 2005, and plans are underway to increase its capacity to 12 MGD.



Little River Water Pollution Control Plant

Awards!

The employees of the Water Utility Division protect the public health and the environment in an award-winning fashion! Every year, the Georgia Water Association of Professionals (GAWP) awards the Gold Award to any water treatment or wastewater treatment plant that has met or exceeded all state or federal requirements for treatment for one year. Sounds easy...hard to do. This means there have been no slip ups or minor violations for both required reporting and inspections as well as having a spotless record for meeting or exceeding all mandates. The County's drinking water is tested almost 100,000 times a year for compliance purposes at each plant. The Platinum Award is given to the treatment facilities that have five (5) consecutive years of the Gold Award. In 2009, the Water Utility received the Georgia Association of Water Professionals Platinum Award for performance at the Reed Creek Wastewater Plant, Little River Wastewater Plant, Kiokee Creek Wastewater Plant, Jim Blanchard Water Treatment Plant, and Clarks Hill Water Treatment Plant.

GAWP also holds a contest amongst laboratories in the state. At the GAWP Fall Conference and Laboratory Symposium, the Columbia County Water Utility's

Central Laboratory won the top prize in its category and was named Laboratory of the Year for Medium Wastewater Treatment Laboratories. These awards are a testimony to the hard work and attention to detail displayed by the staff at the Water Utility.

Two of the Water Utility's employees have garnered individual awards. Each year GAWP receives nominations for outstanding operators across the state. Raymond Lee, Wastewater Treatment Supervisor, was named the Top Operator for District 6 by GAWP in 2009. Raymond has worked for the Water Utility for 12 years, and he holds a Class I Wastewater Treatment Plant Operator Certification.



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On the national level, Margaret Doss received the Harris F. Seidel Lifetime Achievement Award at the Association of Boards of Certification (ABC) Annual Conference in Jacksonville, Florida in January of this year. ABC is an international association of certifying authorities in North and South America. Margaret, the Utility's Water Quality Manager, chairs the Georgia State Board of Examiners for Certification of Water and Wastewater Treatment Plant Operators and Laboratory Analysts. She became involved with ABC by being Georgia's representative in the Association. During her ABC presidency in 2006, Margaret organized a strategic planning initiative that resulted in efforts to expand ABC internationally. Harris F. Seidel was the co-founder of ABC and envisioned an association that would allow certification programs to collaborate ideas, share information, and work together to better the industry.



Margaret Doss with Harris Seidel at the ABC awards ceremony in Jacksonville

Giving You a Tax Break

Kay K. Allen, Tax Commissioner



It's quite simple – if you own a home in Columbia County, live in it as your **permanent full-time residence**, AND you have not yet applied – come in and

apply for a homestead exemption to get benefit of a reduction in your property tax. However, if you have already applied for the exemption, there is no need to reapply unless you receive a letter from the Tax Commissioner's Office or unless there has been a name change to your deed.

If you turned 62 during 2009:

If you turned age 62 during 2009 and your net taxable income is less than \$15,000 (not including retirement or social security) you may be eligible for a local exemption. Bring your 2009 federal and state income tax returns to our office to determine your eligibility.

If you turned 65 during 2009:

If you turned age 65 sometime during the year 2009 AND you have the regular homestead exemption (S1), then you may want to come in and apply for the S1+ which exempts most of the state tax.

If you are age 70 or over:

If you turned age 70 during year 2009 or earlier you may benefit from a different local exemption if the value of your home is greater than \$156,000. There is no income limitation for this exemption.

You may contact the Tax Commissioner's Office, Monday – Friday, 8 AM-5 PM or come by our office at 630 Ronald Reagan Drive in Evans, Building C, 2nd (Main) Floor.

Community Calendar & Announcements

MARCH

- 1 *PCs for Beginners* – covers computer basics such as mousing, computer vocabulary, and basic programs at 2 PM at the Evans Library. Registration is required by calling 706-447-7660.

Non-fiction Book Discussion at Evans Library beginning at 6:30 PM. *Much Depends on Dinner* by Margaret Visser will be discussed.

- 2 *The World of Owls* at Reed Creek Park for ages 5+ from 4:30 – 5:30 PM. Call 706-210-4027 to register. \$3 fee per child for non-members.
- 3 *Resume Writing* – learn how to construct an effective resume at 10 AM at the Evans Library. Registration is required by calling 706-447-7660.

Gardening at Lunch Series at the Evans Library at 12:10-12:45 PM. This month County Extension Agent Charles Phillips will discuss Lawn Care. Bring a lunch and a friend!

- 4 *Night Walk* at Reed Creek Park for ages 5+ from 6–7 PM. We'll be looking mostly for bats, owls, and other fauna that might stop by! Non-members - \$2 fee per child for non-members.
- 8 *Intro to the Internet* – learn how to surf the web with ease at 2 PM at the Evans Library. Registration is required by calling 706-447-7660.
- 10 *Nurturing Nature Walks* for 3-5 year olds at Reed Creek Park from 10-11 AM. Children must be accompanied by an adult. \$2 fee per child over 2 for non-members.

Internet Safety at 10 AM in the Evans Library. Learn how to protect yourself and your finances while shopping online. Registration is required by calling 706-447-7660.

- 12 *All About Frogs* at Reed Creek Park for ages 5+ from 7–8 PM. Children must be accompanied by an adult. Call 706-210-4027 to register. Free.
- 13 *Simply Science* at Reed Creek Park for ages 5+ from 10:00 – 11:30 AM. Collect creek clay and create a miniature volcano, put your hands in ice water without them getting cold and more! Non-members - \$2 fee per child for non-members. Call 706-210-4027 to pre-register.
- 15 *Intro to E-mail* – create an e-mail account and practice sending e-mails at 2 PM at the Evans Library. Registration is required by calling 706-447-7660.

Monday Night Book Discussion on *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* by Steig Larsson at 6:30 PM at the Evans Library.

- 16 *All About Birds* at Reed Creek park for ages 5+ from 4:30 – 5:30 PM. Indoor and outdoor activities. Bring binoculars if you have them! Non-members - \$2 fee per child for non-members. Call 706-210-4027 to pre-register.

It's Not Just Blarney, a program for young adults celebrating Ireland's national holiday, will be given by David Sisler at 5:30 PM in the Evans Library. Registration is required by calling 706-863-1946.

- 17 *Intro to Facebook* – set up an account and learn how to use the social networking site Facebook at 10 AM at the Evans Library. Registration is required by calling 706-447-7660.

- 18 *Nurturing Nature Walks* for 3-5 year olds at Reed Creek Park from 10-11 AM. Children must be accompanied by an adult. \$2 fee per child for non-members.

Brown Bag Lunch Book Discussion at 11:30 AM in the Evans Library. *In the Woods* by Tana French will be discussed.

Forest Foray at Reed Creek Park for ages 5+ from 4:30-5:30 PM.

- 18 Explore off-trail to different areas beyond the swamp! Please bring shoes/boots that can get wet. Non-members - \$2 fee per child for non-members. Call 706-210-4027 to pre-register.
- 19 Expert CZ will discuss *Hot Springs* and the organisms that live in this unique environment at Reed Creek Park from 4:30-5:30 PM.
- 20 *Books Alive! A Celebration of Books!* from 10 AM – 5 PM at the Evans Library. Activities will include hot air balloons, animal guests, jumping castles, games, a petting zoo, and special guest author, Jim Aylesworth!
- 21 *Sunday Scrabble Game* from 2-5 PM for ages 12+ at the Evans Library.
- 22 *Intro to MS Office* – create and save documents in Word, PowerPoint, and Excel at 2 PM at the Evans Library. Registration is required by calling 706-447-7660.
- 24 *Beginning Genealogy* at 10 AM at the Evans Library. Learn the basics of genealogic research and use online databases. Registration required by calling 706-863-1946.
- 26 *All About Frogs* at Reed Creek Park for ages 5+ from 8-9 PM. Children must be accompanied by an adult. Call 706-210-4027 to register. Free.
- 27 As part of *Adopt-a-Stream*, Mike Reardon will teach how to collect important data at Reed Creek Park each month. This chemical certification training for older children and adults will be from 9 AM – 1 PM. Be prepared to get your feet wet. Call 706-210-4027 to register.

The Columbia County Ballet will present the 25th annual production of the *Roar of Love* at 3 and 7 PM at the Bell auditorium. Please call 706-860-1852 or go online at www.columbiacountyballet.com for more information.

- 29 *Advanced MS Word* at 10 AM in the Evans Library. Registration is required by calling 706-447-7660.

Full Moon Meander at Reed Creek Park for ages 5+ from 8-9 PM. See the wonders of the park by moonlight. Non-members - \$2 fee per child for non-members.

- 31 *Budgeting in Excel* at 2 PM in the Evans Library. Learn how to keep track of your finances in MS Excel. Registration is required by calling 706-447-7660.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

- Spring story times are starting at all libraries. Space is limited, so please register by calling 706-863-1946.
 - Euchee Creek library (Grovetown) at 10:30 AM on Wednesdays
 - Harlem Library at 10:30 AM on Tuesdays
 - Evans Library on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays at 10:15 AM for 2 year olds and 11 AM for ages 3-5. Family Story Time at 4 PM on Wednesdays
- *Area Artwork Displays* - The Evans Library is displaying art by Columbia County art teachers.
- AARP volunteers will be preparing tax returns free of charge for the elderly and low income citizens in Columbia County at the Evans and Euchee Creek (Grovetown) Libraries from the first week in February until April 15th. The Euchee Creek Library will be staffed on Mondays (10 AM – 2 PM) and the Evans Library on Tuesdays and Thursdays (10 AM – 2 PM). For more information, please contact Jim Roberts at 706-860-6430, call toll free: 1-888-AARPNOW (1-888-227-7669), or view the AARP website at www.aarp.org/taxaide.